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Administrative and budgetary aspects of the financing of the United Nations peacekeeping operations

National professional officers

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted in response to the request of the General Assembly in its resolution 61/276, section VII, to review the standards of recruitment for National Professional Officers. The report describes the experience to date in the use of National Professional Officers in United Nations peace operations and provides recommendations for addressing challenges in attracting, recruiting and retaining National Professional Officers in post-conflict environments.

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I. Introduction

1. In its report on Administrative and budgetary aspects of the financing of United Nations peacekeeping operations (A/61/852), the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions welcomed the efforts by the Secretariat to increase the level of national staff in peacekeeping operations as it was cost-effective and one way to build national capacity. The Committee recommended that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to review the standards for the recruitment of National Professional Officers, so as to ensure that they were locally appropriate and avoided unnecessary barriers, and also to explore ways of enhancing professional development for all categories of national staff. The General Assembly, in its resolution 61/276, section VII, requested the Secretary-General to review the standards for the recruitment of National Professional Officers and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its sixty-second session for its consideration and action.

II. Background

2. In 1980, the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) decided to permit the use of National Professional Officers for functions in non-headquarters offices which, by their very nature, required national knowledge and experience and so could not be carried out effectively by international Professionals. The ICSC established the following criteria for the use of National Professional Officers in its report for the year 1994 (A/49/30 annex VI), which were adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/223:

(a) The employment of National Professional Officers by a given common system organization should be grounded in a policy framework established by that organization's legislative body. This practice should be set forth in a clearly enunciated policy statement demonstrating its consistency with the organization's operational requirements;

(b) National Professional Officers should be nationals of the country where they are to serve, should be recruited locally and should not be subject to assignment to any duty station outside the home country;

(c) The work performed by National Professional Officers should have a national content. It should be at the Professional level and the same standards of recruitment qualifications and performance as are required for other Professional staff should apply. The functions of all National Professional Officer posts should be justified within the overall efforts of the United Nations system to increase national development and other related categories. National Professional Officers should bring to bear in the job national experience and knowledge of local culture, language traditions and institutions;

(d) Organizations employing National Professional Officers should maintain a balance between international and local Professionals appropriate to their needs, bearing in mind the need to preserve the universal character and the independence of the international civil service;

(e) National Professional Officer posts should be graded on the basis of the Master Standard for the classification of Professional posts (and related Tier II

standards where these have been developed). Their conditions of service should be established in accordance with the principle of the best prevailing conditions in the locality for nationals carrying out functions at the same level, through the application of the National Professional Officer salary survey methodology promulgated by ICSC;

(f) The career prospects of National Professional Officers are necessarily limited, given (i) the continued employment of international staff in senior management positions, (ii) the number of grades in the category and (iii) the fact that the functions they perform may be finite. Organizations should make National Professional Officers aware of these limitations. Within that context, however, organizations should endeavour to develop the potential of National Professional Officers as a matter of sound personnel policy.

3. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General on the greater use of national staff in field missions (A/58/765), National Professional Officers were first employed in United Nations operations in 1995 in the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) as human rights officers. Two years later, National Professional Officer positions were established in the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) in the Judicial System Assessment Project and later on in the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) in the areas of governance and public administration. With the establishment of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the use of National Professional Officers was expanded in response to the need for personnel with knowledge of the local culture, language traditions and institutions to support the implementation of the Mission's mandate. The increased use of National Professional Officers also served the goal of strengthening national capacity and development, providing national staff with the opportunity to contribute directly to reconciliation, recovery and reconstruction efforts.

4. The number of National Professional Officer posts in United Nations peace operations has increased by 234 per cent in recent years, from 306 in January 2004 to 1,023 as of 31 December 2007. While missions recognize the value of the role of National Professional Officers in implementing the mission mandate, recruiting them in post-conflict environments within the ICSC framework poses significant challenges. The average vacancy rate for these posts was 38 per cent as of 31 December 2007, as compared with an average vacancy rate of 13 per cent for national staff in the General Service category in field missions.

III. Experiences of field missions

5. United Nations peace operations have taken a number of measures to help address the high vacancy rates among National Professional Officer positions. To attract qualified national candidates living abroad, some missions conducted recruitment campaigns in countries outside the duty station where a high number of nationals reside. Other missions advertised vacancies on websites for nationals living abroad. In addition to advertising in local newspapers, missions that operate United Nations radio stations advertised vacancies through radio broadcasts. Some missions also conducted regional recruitment drives outside the capital city to expand the pool of candidates. A number of missions developed partnerships with United Nations agencies, funds and programmes as well as with local universities

and non-governmental organizations to increase awareness of employment opportunities with the missions and to target women candidates.

6. Despite intensive recruitment efforts, United Nations peace operations invariably encountered difficulties in attracting, recruiting and retaining National Professional Officers in post-conflict environments. While missions' experiences in recruiting National Professional Officers varied in response to the unique conditions prevailing in the mission area, the difficulties could generally be attributed to the following:

- A lack of required academic qualifications
- A lack of required professional work experience
- The inability to verify credentials
- Competition in the local market place for professional skills
- The limitations on the use of National Professional Officers
- A lack of qualified candidates for positions in remote locations

7. To meet the academic requirements for National Professional Officer posts, the candidate must have a minimum of a first level university degree. In some missions, prolonged conflicts had disrupted the educational system for decades, preventing younger generations from obtaining university degrees, while individuals with a university education had often emigrated. In other instances, candidates might have attained university degrees but did not have the required language skills. Difficulties were also experienced in finding candidates with the skills required for specialized or technical fields, for example in the communications field, or with the required expertise in areas such as human rights, rule of law or protection. Missions generally reported difficulty in finding female candidates with the required qualifications and in attracting female candidates to work in fields that were traditionally male-dominated professions in their countries. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, women were prevented from attending school for several years, leading to a shortage of women candidates with the required academic qualifications for National Professional Officer positions. Finding qualified female candidates was particularly difficult in more remote locations outside the capital.

8. Even when National Professional Officer candidates possessed university degrees, prolonged conflicts often led to high unemployment and the closure of private companies and other organizations, thus preventing national candidates from acquiring the number of years of professional experience required under the established classification standards for Professional level posts. In the case of Timor-Leste and Kosovo, for example, where the United Nations acted as an administrative authority, the younger generation had attained university degrees. However, they lacked the required professional experience needed for National Professional Officer positions. Locally recruited General Service staff often obtained university degrees while working with the mission, but were unable to be considered for National Professional Officer posts as their work experience at the General Service level could not be considered as professional experience.

9. Many National Professional Officer candidates claimed that their degrees or certifications had been lost or destroyed as a result of hostilities or relocation. If universities were still functioning, candidates were often able to provide letters of

attestation from the relevant educational institutions confirming their educational qualifications, although in some cases, there may have been concerns as to the reliability of such representations. Where educational institutions had closed or their records been destroyed, there was no possibility of reliably verifying academic qualifications. Difficulties were also experienced in verifying prior professional experience and in obtaining references from former employers that had relocated during a conflict.

10. As National Professional Officers perform functions requiring local experience, are recruited on an exclusively local basis and are not subject to expatriation, the remuneration for National Professional Officers is based on the best prevailing conditions in the locality for nationals carrying out functions at the same level. Mission recruitment efforts often involve outreach to national candidates abroad to encourage the individuals to return to their home country. The success of attracting nationals abroad to apply for National Professional Officer positions was somewhat limited, as the National Professional Officer salaries were not seen as attractive, particularly as compared with salaries earned abroad. Many of the national candidates abroad expected to receive international benefits and rejected offers of appointment with local conditions of service. In certain post-conflict situations, the shortage of skilled candidates in the local job market created considerable competition for professional candidates as national and international companies resumed operations. With a high demand for skilled personnel, professional candidates were able to negotiate higher salaries. Some professionals, such as legal officers, earned more in the private sector. Retention of National Professional Officers could also be a challenge. In some instances, once National Professional Officers had enhanced their skills through experience and training with the mission, they were prone to resign to take up offers from other organizations or in the private sector.

11. The ICSC criteria for the use of National Professional Officers, approved by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/223, require that the work performed by National Professional Officers have a national content, be related to the overall efforts of the United Nations system to increase national development and bring to bear in the job national experience and knowledge of the local culture, language traditions and institutions. When National Professional Officers were initially introduced in United Nations peace operations, the functions performed were limited to those that required national experience and knowledge of local culture, institutions and/or language. As such, National Professional Officers were predominantly employed in the legal, judicial, political affairs, human rights and other substantive fields. In enhancing the efforts of United Nations peace operations to contribute to building national capacity, the use of National Professional Officers was expanded to include administrative and technical areas, particularly where there was a requirement for local knowledge and languages. National Professional Officers are now employed in functions throughout the administrative and logistics fields, including finance, procurement, human resources, information and communications technology, engineering, transport, security, and conduct and discipline. While flexibility has been exercised in the functions for which National Professional Officers are engaged, the locations where National Professional Officers can be employed are limited to those where there is a need to strengthen national development. Accordingly, National Professional Officers have not been

employed at headquarters duty stations such as the United Nations Logistics Base in Brindisi, Italy, or the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus in Nicosia.

12. Missions also reported difficulty in filling National Professional Officer posts in more remote locations outside the capital city. Efforts to encourage qualified candidates from one part of the country to take up positions in other parts of the country were often unsuccessful, particularly where regional conflicts existed within the country.

IV. Addressing recruitment challenges

13. Addressing challenges in attracting, recruiting and retaining National Professional Officers for service with United Nations peace operations in post-conflict environments requires a degree of flexibility in applying the recruitment standards, which would enable individual missions to respond to their unique requirements while respecting the integrity of the National Professional Officer programme and the established ICSC criteria.

14. The requirement for a university degree may be difficult to fulfil in specific situations commonly encountered in post-conflict environments where educational institutions have not been functioning for prolonged periods or groups of individuals were prevented from attending university, or where candidates had university degrees that were destroyed or misplaced during hostilities or relocation. In cases where educational institutions have not been functioning for prolonged periods and missions experience difficulty in recruiting National Professional Officers owing to a lack of candidates with a first level university degree, missions should be given the flexibility to develop a consistent practice to address the problem, taking into account the unique challenges at the duty station. Such flexibility measures could include advertising National Professional Officer positions to require a first level university degree or a combination of relevant post-secondary education, experience, training or certification, as appropriate to the functions. Another approach could be to permit the recruitment of National Professional Officers without a degree on the understanding that the individual would obtain a degree within a specific timeframe. In situations where candidates indicate that they possess a first level university education but are unable to produce a degree that was lost or destroyed during hostilities, missions should be given the flexibility to recruit candidates based on the information provided in the personal history profile and should continue to make their best efforts to obtain verification of academic qualifications. As letters of appointment specify that employment is subject to certification of the accuracy of information provided in the personal history profile, if it is subsequently found that a candidate provided false information regarding his/her academic qualifications on the personal history form, employment could be terminated.

15. It can be difficult in post-conflict environments, particularly where conflicts and high unemployment have prevailed for many years, for candidates to meet the standard requirement for the number of years of professional experience needed for National Professional Officer positions. It can also be difficult to verify past work experience when previous employers have relocated. Missions should have the flexibility to recruit National Professional Officers who possess a university degree at the entry level of NO-A without the requirement for any previous professional

experience, on a probationary basis. Moreover, the inability to contact previous employers to verify prior professional experience should not prevent the recruitment of National Professional Officer candidates. Missions should be able to recruit National Professional Officer candidates on the basis of the information provided in their personal history form and to make their best efforts to verify the previous employment. If it is subsequently found that a candidate misrepresented facts on the personal history profile, or if the individual's demonstrated knowledge and/or performance indicate significant weaknesses in professional competence linked to educational credentials or experience claims made, his/her appointment may be terminated as specified in the letter of appointment.

16. Training should also be provided to National Professional Officer candidates where there is a shortage in the local labour market for specific skills, including language skills. To assist with training, the Department of Field Support intends to explore with the United Nations Volunteers Programme the possibility of extending the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) programme to United Nations peace operations. Under the programme, expatriates return to their home country as United Nations Volunteers to contribute their skills and services to their homeland's development in a variety of ways, including training. The Department of Field Support intends to work with the United Nations Volunteers Programme to explore the possibility of using the TOKTEN programme or to develop a similar programme whereby United Nations Volunteers would help to train National Professional Officer candidates in specific areas identified by field missions to meet their individual requirements.

17. Salaries for National Professional Officers are established in accordance with ICSC methodology, which is based on the best prevailing conditions for similar work found locally. While National Professional Officers are by definition locally recruited, it is often necessary to reach out to national candidates with the required skills and education living abroad to encourage them to return to their home countries and take up jobs with the mission. While the local National Professional Officer salary may not be attractive enough to encourage nationals to return to their home countries, it might be feasible to explore the possibility of providing some form of compensation for relocation to the country of nationality, with the requirement that the National Professional Officer serve for a minimum of one year with the mission. Similarly, providing some compensation for relocation of National Professional Officers to take up positions outside the capital may also help to attract staff to serve in more remote regional areas.

18. To further enhance the use of National Professional Officers, it is proposed that the use of National Professional Officers be permitted in United Nations peace operations based in headquarters locations, such as the United Nations Logistics Base in Brindisi, Italy, and the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in Nicosia, where the functions require knowledge of the local language or institutions.

19. The use of National Professional Officers in United Nations peace operations will continue to be closely monitored by the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of Field Support.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

20. The endorsement of the General Assembly is sought for the flexibility measures proposed in the present report and summarized below in an effort to address the current challenges faced by United Nations peace operations in the recruitment of National Professional Officers, as follows:

(a) In situations where educational institutions have not been functioning for prolonged periods and difficulty has been encountered in recruiting National Professional Officers owing to a lack of candidates with a first level university degree, that missions be given the flexibility to develop a consistent practice to address the problem on a temporary basis, taking into account the unique challenges at the duty station.

(b) In situations where National Professional Officer candidates are unable to produce a university degree that was reported lost or destroyed during hostilities or where it has not been possible to verify prior professional experience, that missions be given the flexibility to recruit candidates based on the information provided in the personal history profile while continuing to make their best efforts to obtain verification of academic qualifications and/or prior professional experience.

(c) Where it is difficult to identify National Professional Officer candidates with the required prior professional experience, that missions be given the flexibility to recruit National Professional Officers who possess a university degree at the entry level of NO-A without the requirement for any previous professional experience, on a probationary basis.

(d) That National Professional Officers be employed in United Nations peace operations in non-field locations, such as the United Nations Logistics Base in Brindisi and the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, where the functions require knowledge of the local language or institutions.